

**SUBJECT:** Mileage reimbursement for soil and water conservation district directors

**COMMITTEE:** Natural Resources —favorable, without amendment

**VOTE:** 6 ayes — Puente, Gattis, Creighton, Hilderbran, Laubenberg, O'Day  
0 nays  
3 absent — Hamilton, Gallego, Guillen

**WITNESSES:** For — Jimmy Kleimann, Colorado Soil and Water Conservation District;  
Lawerence Shimek, Colorado Soil and Water Conservation District; Rick  
Schilling, Fayette Soil and Water Conservation District  
  
Against — None

**BACKGROUND:** Agriculture Code, sec. 201.077 defines compensation and mileage allowance for soil and water conservation district directors. Under sec. 201.077 (a), a director receives 18 cents a mile for travel between the director's residence and board of director meetings within the conservation district. Under sec. 201.077 (c), one director per district receives 18 cents a mile for travel when attending the annual statewide meeting of directors.  
  
The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Commission currently allocates \$65,000 per year to cover the cost of the travel reimbursement for soil and water conservation district directors.  
  
The general appropriations act sets the travel reimbursement cost for state employees. The current state rate is 44.5 cents per mile.

**DIGEST:** HB 496 would amend the Agriculture Code, secs. 201.077 (a) and (c) to compensate soil and water conservation district directors under the state mileage reimbursement rate as specified in the general appropriations act.  
  
The reimbursement rate would apply to travel between the directors' residences and board of director meetings within the conservation district. This rate also would apply to travel for one director per district when attending the annual statewide meeting of directors.

HB 496 would apply to travel occurring on or after the effective date of the bill. The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2007.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

The state has not modified the soil and water mileage conservation directors' mileage reimbursement rate of 18 cents a mile since 1981. At the current rate, directors must spend their own money to cover the costs of traveling to meetings. With rising gasoline prices and inflation, the current rate makes it increasingly costly for directors to carry out their duties.

Soil and water conservation directors are elected to their positions and serve without pay. The state should fairly compensate directors for travel costs in order to attract qualified people to serve. By raising the mileage reimbursement rate, HB 496 would compensate more fairly and accurately the directors who serve on these important local boards.

State employees are compensated for travel costs at the current state mileage reimbursement rate of 44.5 cents. The rate is calculated every two years and set in the general appropriations to reimburse these employees for their legitimate travel costs. Soil and water conservation directors should be reimbursed on the same basis rather than inflexibly locking the reimbursement rate into state law.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

HB 496 would result in an additional cost to the state of an estimated \$191,388 per fiscal biennium for travel reimbursement to soil and water conservation district directors. Those funds could be better spent on more pressing state needs.

**NOTES:**

The Soil and Water Conservation Board currently allocates about \$65,000 per year for soil and water conservation district director mileage claims. According to the fiscal note, the cost for compensating the district directors' mileage at 44.5 cents per mile would amount to a total of \$160,694 per fiscal year. Under the revised reimbursement rate, the Soil and Water Conservation Board would need an additional \$95,694 per fiscal year in general-revenue related funds.